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THE MUSEUM'S PART IN THE MAKING OF AMERICANS<sup>1</sup>

IF there may be a text without a sermon, the text for this paper is found in the remark of a little girl who was visiting the Boston Art Museum. She was in the room of colonial portraits, and while she was looking up at the faces of Washington and Adams, Warren, Hancock, and "Dorothy Q," she was told that these were the people who had made the beginnings of our country and had passed it on to us to continue their work. "Oh," she interrupted, "but America is all finished now!"

America finished! Until three years ago, it seemed merely amusing—the talk of such little girls—but now as we echo her words, we pause, realizing how seriously we have been put to it to find out not when was America finished, but what and where is America, and who are Americans? For even in Boston we have given up answering these questions by referring to the Mayflower. From every corner of the globe the answers had been coming in upon us, until we found ourselves in the midst of a civilization as difficult as it was rich; a civilization which presented the twin problems of how to conserve the riches and how to unify the peoples poured into our midst.

It is only a matter of course that museums stand ready to do their part toward these problems, for it is not by accident that a large proportion of museum visitors are foreign-born. The immigrant and his child want the museum. The Italian bride from her far-away quarter of the city comes there still in her orange blossoms, and the newly arrived Russian boy comes with his word or two of English; and a Madonna's smile or a brass icon with a bit of Russian inscription knit for them their past with this present. For where so clearly as in the museum can the immigrant be encouraged to believe that in this new world are continued the good things of his old one? Englishman, Frenchman, Jap-

anese, Italian, Syrian—all may come to the museum and feel more at home than the native-born American, to so large an extent do their countries furnish the materials of which our art museums are made.

But it is not only because he finds there a familiar object that the immigrant comes to the museum; it is because he enjoys the things he sees. Appreciation and taste are his long inheritance; it is second nature to a Japanese to care for flowing line and to a Spaniard to revel in color. And the immigrant, ignorant and unlettered man that he is, has not yet learned the American way of spelling Art with a capital letter and setting it apart for women's clubs and moneyed connoisseurs. The eagerness of a class of little Russian Jewesses is a pleasant thing to see. "Oh," they exclaim, when the docent apologizes for keeping them a moment beyond the hour, "we could stay here seven hours."

And though it is obvious that there is not in all Italians a bent toward painting, nor is there music in all Germans, nor a literary gift in every Englishman, yet there is undoubtedly a diversity of gifts—whether of tongues or of arts—and America has become the potential heir to them all. Will she accept her good fortune? Or as the Syrian promptly discards his fez, and the Italian woman her scarf because they are un-American, must they also learn to discard as bad form their leisurely grace of manner, their craving for beauty, their simple faith in things mystical?

The museum is here to help voice the country's answer. "Let democracy, if need be, have its ready-made American clothes," one can imagine it saying as its doors swing open to offer its message to street and school, "but to love beautiful color, to embroider a tasteful pattern, to mould, to sing, to paint—these too are 'good American.' So good are they, that not only is there money in them, but opportunity and honor in the new country; so highly are they valued—the museum itself is evidence—that not only the state but private individuals spend their time and their money to cherish these things. America has need of the man who comes to make beautiful her

<sup>1</sup> Read by Mrs. Scales on May 23, 1917, before the American Association of Museums, and to be included in their Proceedings. Published here by permission of the Association.

paths as well as to dig her streets and lay her sewers." And if, so speaking, the museum can bring home to the immigrant his chance to help enrich the head and heart of his new country as well as her pockets, to serve the public and not merely the taskmaster on the job, will it not be giving him an inducement toward loyal citizenship to which he is eager to respond?

The concrete ways in which the museum tries to make clear its message are the habitual ways of its daily work, with merely a change of emphasis or an added effort at interpretation. At the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, we have this winter been keeping in mind this work with the citizen. There is nothing startling to report, but a summary of what has been done may open up an exchange of ideas to further such work.

Lectures to foreigners have been given in their own language, both in and outside the Museum, with the use of lantern slides illustrating the Museum collections. Especially interesting is the work done on his own initiative by an Italian among Italians of the suburbs. Mr. Malgeri has shown slides of the Italian paintings, sculpture, embroideries, laces, ironwork, etc., in the Museum, with the object, as he put it, to help his people "to see and admire the works of their old country—lest they forget; to encourage them to visit the Museum with their friends, both as an intellectual enjoyment and as a duty to their country; to awaken in them gratitude to the Museum, which is the work, not of the government as in Italy, but of private persons for their benefit; and to stimulate them by examples of their national handicrafts to good works of their own." He reported as a prompt result of his lectures, the visit to the Museum of three families from one quite distant suburb.

A more intensive form of work has been done with high school pupils. As usual, large numbers of history classes have come to supplement the record of events in their books by the sight of related objects. In such docent work, the connection with the ideals of citizenship is a matter of stress and direction. When the high school girl answers, "Yes, I would like my history,

only there is too much killing," the docent replies, "Yes, that is why you come to the Museum, to see the other side of history—the lives of the people, their homes, the things they made and used and cared for: to see Charles I as Van Dyck saw him—the beauty-loving monarch, not the king who started a civil war."

But much more important is the work, now three years old, with pupils from high schools who are given vocational drawing in the Museum. By arrangement with the school committee, they are allowed to work in the Museum five afternoons a week, and the work done is credited to them as a school course. The instruction in drawing—free-hand and mechanical and from casts—and in design in color is given by members of the Museum school faculty; the pupils are chosen by competition from drawings done in the grade schools; and the nominal tuition has so far been met by gifts from friends interested in the plan. There are now three classes at work, and pupils who have had this training can of course enter the Museum school with advanced standing and with a decided impetus toward future success. There are now four such pupils in the school. Some of the names make their own comment on the relation of this class to Americanization: Elfbaum, Kolb, Knudsen, Murphy, Zachrisson, Rudolph Bloom, Frederstefano, and the like. Their teachers feel greatly encouraged, not to say enthusiastic about the result already accomplished; and one of them, who has had a wide experience in teaching, reported that she had found not only unequaled interest but unusual talent in this class, so that she prefers it to all her other work. Probably many of these pupils will take up commercial design because of its quick financial returns, and as their numbers increase, we may hope to see their mark upon our everyday surroundings. Already one of the boys has won a hundred-dollar prize in a competition opened to high school pupils for a poster for a National Electric Exhibition.

Again, both summer and winter, we have had our stories for children from city playground, settlement, or school.

The summer work is always mainly significant because of numbers—six thousand eight hundred and thirty-six having come to us last summer; but some of the stories were chosen with a patriotic end in view. This winter the subject of the stories has been definitely America and citizenship. Their plan and scope was partly due to the stimulus given by the new civic work of the Woman's Education Association of Boston, and partly due to one of our most faithful boys: "I like best stories about America," he said.

Within the limitations set by the Museum collections, a series was planned called "The Long Journey to America: From Old Homes to New;" and from the first story, "The Age When Dreams Came True," the story of Columbus, we followed the different nations of settlers—Spanish, Dutch, French, English, Syrian, Italian, and Japanese—coming with each one from the setting and atmosphere of his old home and feeling the lure and effects of the new one. In most cases this has meant that the Museum material has been used as background and illustration rather than as subject-matter; as, for example, in the story of Pizarro—"From Spanish Towns to the Temple of the Sun"—when Spanish paintings and the Museum's Peruvian embroideries and pottery gave the setting.

When two of the most constant attendants among the boys were asked which story they liked best, one replied, "The earlier ones, the stories of Columbus, Pizarro, the Dutch and Paul Revere, for they helped us in our history at school," and the other answered, "The Syrian Boy, for it showed what our education can mean to us." This story of the Syrian boy—Mr. Abraham Ribbany's autobiography retold and adapted to children—

was an ideal story from the point of view of the story-teller, giving, as it did, the archaically meagre but charming Syrian home life of the little fellow, the eager, restless mind of the boy, his longing for America and its opportunities, his struggles with difficulties here, his growing, ardent patriotism, and his determination to be not a Syrian living in America, but a true American.

Ex-President Eliot once made the suggestion that museum stories would be more vital if they could substitute for the hero of an ancient myth such a person as the winner of a Carnegie medal. And though the disadvantages and difficulties are apparent of an appropriate modern subject for a museum story, the advantage of some of the later stories of this series was equally apparent in their direct appeal and relation to the boy and girl of the audience.

Such methods of work with citizens, actual or to-be, gain their importance, of course, because always behind the ways of using it, there stands the museum itself. A little Russian Jewess, tremendously impressed with a diamond-encrusted watch in our collection, asked anxiously, "How did it get here?" And when she was told that it was given to the Museum by a lady, she responded instantly, "Did the lady owe the Museum something?" To such a child, whose experience of life would turn even the museum into a vast pawn-shop, it was a satisfaction to describe the spirit and purpose of givers and lenders to a museum and the reasons for the making of such a collection. For in most of our cities our museums stand as an example, through their lenders, donors, and administrators of unqualified generosity and public-mindedness—an example of true American spirit.

Laura W. L. Scales.

